

Religious broadcasters brace for uncertain future

March 6, 2009

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Digital podcasts and streaming video might bring Christian audiences inspirational messages in the future, but they aren't bringing in the cash broadcast ministries need to weather a painful economy.

To make ends meet, religious broadcasters are tightening their belts and going back to basics. That means sticking with time-tested formulas, postponing innovations and counting on loyal—largely senior—audiences to keep donating even when it hurts.

The hope is that Christian broadcasters might actually enjoy a competitive edge during tight times that comes from serving a clientele with holy zeal for the cause.

Trinity Broadcasting Network, the nation's largest Christian TV network, laid off workers and scrambled to fill programming holes as Dallas pastor T.D. Jakes and other big-name ministries cut costs by producing fewer shows. (RNS Photo)

“You don't find businesses making sacrifices to make sure advertising

dollars are paid to broadcasters. That's not part of their paradigm," said Craig Parshall, senior vice president of the National Religious Broadcasters.

"But individual families are willing to be sacrificial because of the mission of Christian broadcasting."

Whether they depend on donors, advertising dollars or a combination of the two, mass media ministries are feeling the recession squeeze:

- *Christian radio giant Salem Communications sold four stations, slashed 10 percent of its workforce and trimmed 5 percent off all salaries. Nonetheless, Salem's stock price has tumbled 74 percent in the past year to less than \$1 per share.*
- *Trinity Broadcasting Network, the nation's largest Christian TV network, laid off workers and scrambled to fill programming holes as T.D. Jakes, Joyce Meyer and other big-name ministries cut costs by producing fewer shows.*
- *Focus on the Family, which has produced James Dobson's radio show since 1977, has eliminated about 450 jobs—30 percent of its workforce peak—since 2004, including 200 job cuts since November.*

The industry shows signs of contraction at a time when its future is fraught with uncertainty. And it's not just the economic downturn that is causing turmoil: Last year, a study found the percentage of megachurches with a radio ministry dropped from 44 percent in 2000 to 24 percent in 2008. Likewise, the percentage with television ministries dropped from 38 percent to 23 percent.

For programs still on the air, the challenge is attracting younger audiences who will give as consistently as their parents and grandparents. Cracking

that puzzle will require experimentation, but few feel they can take significant risks in today's climate marked by razor-thin margins.

"The industry is at a crossroads," said Paul Creasman, associate professor of communications at Southern Wesleyan University in Central, S.C., and a former Christian radio personality and producer.

"The audience is dwindling, and they have to figure out what to do. But the Web is not the answer, because older audiences don't use the Internet, ... and younger audiences will go to the Web for content, but they'll probably be less likely to donate."

Moving content online may be broadcasting's future, but it's a nerve-racking endeavor that doesn't necessarily pay the bills of the present.

For now, broadcasters are trying to maintain—and even expand—the support of listeners who see family-friendly airwaves as one way to serve a higher cause, said Kevin Peterson, who covers Christian music stations for the trade publication *Radio & Records*.

"A lot of (stations) are still doing very well" with fund raising, Peterson said. "When stations have done a really good job at becoming a part of the community—being not just entertainment, but a resource and a friend—they find people who say, 'I may not be able to give as much or as often, but I'm going to find a way because you're making a difference in people's lives.'"

To chart their way through recessionary waters, broadcasters are refocusing on their core strategies. Often, that means programming changes, though the types of changes vary from one outlet to the next.

Moody Radio, heard on more than 700 stations nationwide, has thoroughly revamped its format to about 80 percent talk. That means more preaching-and-teaching, a favorite genre for senior audiences.

Over time, Moody hopes to integrate more interactive talk, which tends to attract younger audiences. But the transition will be more of a hybrid that weaves talk together with preaching-and-teaching, not replacing either one.

At TBN, viewers are seeing new faces in slots that used to belong to some of televangelism's biggest names. Twelve new ministries, an unusually large number, have debuted on TBN within the past year, according to spokesperson John Casoria. Many of those shows already cut their teeth on TBN-owned platforms such as the Church Channel.